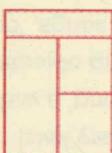


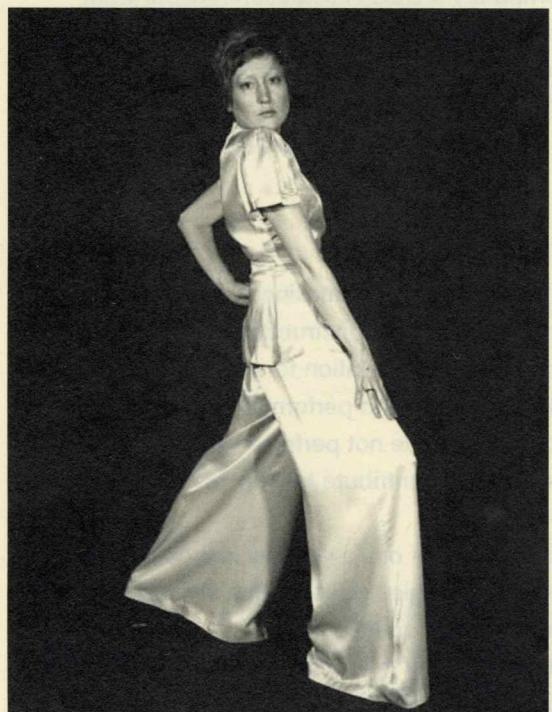
# MARTHA WILSON: STAGING THE SELF

Curator: Peter Dykhuys

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Martha Wilson, Goddess (From A Portfolio of Models), 1974. B&W photograph. Courtesy of: ICI, New York.

## WAYS OF THINKING

*Ways of Thinking* is designed for anyone interested in exploring contemporary art and its exhibition framework. It offers succinct and synthesized information on the exhibition's concept, the artists and the works featured. For the complete version of *Ways of Thinking* that includes bibliographic references, please see our website: [www.ellengallery.concordia.ca/2006/en/](http://www.ellengallery.concordia.ca/2006/en/)

Martha Wilson is a pioneering American feminist artist and gallery director who, over the past four decades, has created innovative photographic and video works that explore her female subjectivity through role-playing, costume transformations and invasions of male and female personas. She began making videos and photo/text works in the early 1970s when she was working toward a Ph.D. in English at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and teaching English at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design where, in a male-dominated Conceptualist milieu, her work was not taken very seriously. Wilson further developed her performative and video-based practice after moving in 1974 to New York City. Two years later she founded and then directed Franklin Furnace, an artist-run centre in Tribeca dedicated to the exploration and promotion of artists' books, installation art, and video and performance art.

Wilson's early Halifax projects were created in relative geographical, social and artistic isolation yet she made work produced with modest means that has been regarded by many as prefiguring some of Judith Butler's theories about gender performativity. Along with Suzy Lake, based in Montreal in the early 70s, Wilson used the camera lens as a mirror of sorts to play 'dress-up' in front of and to stage a series of investigations of her subjectivity and 'self'. Their strategies would be echoed in the photo-based work of artists such as Cindy Sherman who came to prominence in the 1980s.

This exhibition presents three interwoven layers of Wilson's career, throughout which she has been a force of transformative change, considered both within the context of early feminist and socially engaged studio practice and in her role as a disseminator of like-minded individuals' work. A selection of Wilson's early solo photographic works from her years in Halifax, a transitional period in her life, shows her innovations in playing with different age, gender and social identities. In New York in the mid-1970s she continued to be active as a performance artist in collaboration with other feminist performers in the female group DISBAND (1978–82) and then in solo performances in which she 'invaded' the personas of Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush and other political figures of the Conservative Right. The third interwoven stage of Wilson's career is represented in the exhibition by her selection of projects by other artists and curators—one project from each of Franklin Furnace's thirty years of programming, from 1976 through 2006 – which add up to a self-portrait of sorts. The projects Wilson has chosen are historically significant for pushing the boundaries of exhibition and display practice and for disrupting cultural expectations about art, politics, gender, and race.

## DISBAND

In tandem with her public presence as Director of Franklin Furnace, Wilson maintained her practice as a performance artist and, as with her work as a gallery administrator, developed her desire to work with other like-minded artists. Wilson formed the all-female vaudevillian-punk group DISBAND (1978 - 82) that, in its early days included Daile Kaplan, Barbara Kruger and April Gornik. In its next evolutionary stage, Wilson performed in a revamped DISBAND with Ilona Granet, Donna Henes, Ingrid Sischy and Diane Torr. None of the performers, however, were trained musicians let alone capable of playing musical instruments at the most

rudimentary level. Armed with their vocal chords and 'playing' a wide range of domestic noise-generating objects, DISBAND, through chants, skipping songs, 'call-outs' and hand clapping, irreverently inserted the female voice into the male forum of New York punk rock while commenting on social issues in an increasingly conservative American social zeitgeist.

## THE FIRST (AND SECOND) LADIES

With a strong feminist programming presence, Franklin Furnace often found itself in conflict with an increasingly conservative American political system, particularly during the two terms of Ronald Reagan's presidency (1980 – 1988). The struggle for a voice in the New York art community involved hard-fought battles with conservative groups who attempted to censor Franklin Furnace's programming through direct intervention or by pressure placed on governmental arts agencies to deny the gallery funding. Wilson, as Director, held her ground throughout these tumultuous years.

During this volatile period, Wilson produced a series of satirical performances in which she impersonated 'First Ladies' – the high-profile presidential wives of the Republican Right such as Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush and, during the Clinton Administration, Tipper Gore (wife of then Vice President Al Gore), who led pro-censorship, content advisory campaigns against the music industry and the creative community. By dressing up and using parody, irony and humour in her delivery, Wilson 'dressed down' those on the opposite side of her political spectrum, revealing the privileges, biases and right-wing ideologies imbedded in their worldviews.

## 30 PROJECTS FROM 30 YEARS OF FRANKLIN FURNACE ARCHIVE, INC.

Franklin Furnace's mission is to present, preserve, interpret, proselytize and advocate on behalf of avant-garde art, especially forms that may be vulnerable due to institutional neglect, their ephemeral nature, or politically unpopular content. Franklin Furnace is dedicated to serving artists by providing both physical and virtual venues for the presentation of time-based visual art, including but not limited to artists' books and periodicals, installation art, performance art, "variable media art"; and to undertake other activities related to these purposes. Franklin Furnace is committed to serving emerging artists; to assuming an aggressive pedagogical stance with regard to the value of

avant-garde art to life; and to fostering artists' zeal to broadcast ideas.\*

Although Franklin Furnace closed its physical space at 112 Franklin Street in Tribeca in 1997, it continues as a virtual exhibition site at [www.franklinfurnace.org](http://www.franklinfurnace.org) and maintains an active archive in Brooklyn while continuing to offer grants to emerging artists. Wilson, as Founding Director, is one of the longest-standing administrators of a single institution in the contemporary New York art community. She continues to be a fierce advocate of its mandate: Franklin Furnace – on a mission to make the world safe for avant-garde art.

This section of the exhibition creates a 'self portrait' of sorts of Martha Wilson through her own selection of 30 notable projects from Franklin Furnace's adventurous history of presenting contemporary art. Each selection reflects what Wilson intellectually, politically, socially and, most importantly, personally believes to be worthy of revisiting and retelling.

\* from the current website of Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc.

## EXPLORE

- The ways in which artmaking is related to and contributes to the construction of identity;
- Notions of self in relation to questions of image, dramatic effect, and performance. When are we and when are we not performing and how does this affect or contribute to who we are and what we do?
- The question of one's visibility in a culture. What types of strategies does Martha Wilson employ in examining this question?
- Activism and try to identify the ways in which the various works presented in this exhibition are activist. What historical and political contexts are these works responding to?
- The ways in which one constructs oneself and one's image. What is required to do this and how are these constructions interpreted?
- Ephemeral art forms. What are they, why are they vulnerable, and why is their preservation important? Consider Franklin Furnace's role and importance in presenting, preserving, and interpreting these types of forms.

## **Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery**

Concordia University

1400 boul. de Maisonneuve West, LB 165

Montreal (Quebec) H3G 1M8

Metro Guy-Concordia

T 514.848.2424 #4750

ellengal@alcor.concordia.ca

[www.ellengallery.concordia.ca](http://www.ellengallery.concordia.ca)



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